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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 001327

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/14/2019
TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM PHUM PINR BL
SUBJECT: NEW VIDEO CASTS DOUBT ON PANDO "MASSACRE"

REF: 08 LA PAZ 2543

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires John Creamer for reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On the one-year anniversary of the September 11, 2008 clash in Pando department that left 11 dead, local opposition groups released new video evidence that casts doubt on the GOB's version of events. Poloff traveled to the site of the conflict on September 11 and 12 to interview a diverse range of local leaders. All agreed the clash was not -- as the GOB maintains and as Unasur and the UN have supported in official reports -- a massacre planned by then-Prefect Leopoldo Fernandez but rather a regrettable conflict that spun out of control. As Fernandez is the main opposition party's vice presidential candidate in the December elections, the release of this information may hamper GOB attempts to accelerate criminal proceedings against him. End summary.

¶2. (C) Cobija Civic Committee President Carballo told Poloff the Committee worked with journalists (some of whom have been hiding in Brazil since the government crackdown that followed the conflict) and opposition groups to compile video evidence of the events of September 11 and 12, 2008. They reportedly held the resulting documentary until the one-year anniversary of the conflict for maximum impact. Widely broadcast on the news, the documentary dovetails with the statements given by our sources.

¶3. (C) Post previously has reported concerns with the official GOB version of the September 11, 2008 conflict (reftel), which the Morales administration called an ambush and a "massacre" implemented by Fernandez against unarmed campesinos. Subsequently, Unasur, Amnesty International, the UN, and the GOB's Human Rights Ombudsman published reports supporting the GOB. However, a variety of sources including former Cobija Mayor (and Fernandez rival) Miguel "Chiquitin" Becerra, opposition Senator Paulo Bravo, District Prosecutor Eloy Aspeti, Civic Committee President Henry Carballo, Pando Human Rights Ombudsman Edwin Torrez, and Porvenir townspeople tell a different story: heavily armed local residents initially tried to prevent violence but were enraged after campesinos shot and killed two townspeople and took nine people hostage. The resulting shoot-out, they say, while regrettable and ultimately one-sided, was not planned.

¶ 14. (C) Interviews and video indicate that early on the morning of September 11, 2008, approximately 1,000 campesinos from Pando and Beni departments were marching toward the town of Porvenir from two different directions on their way to Cobija, the department capital. The marchers were protesting the opposition's taking of the GOB's land redistribution office (INRA). Apprised of the situation, then-Prefect Fernandez ordered workteams to dig two large ditches at strategic locations to prevent the campesinos from uniting in Porvenir. (According to Senator Bravo, Fernandez was mindful of a January 2007 conflict in Cochabamba, in which GOB-aligned cocaleros burned down the Prefecture and two people died.) At approximately three a.m., the first group of campesinos encountered a Prefecture team finishing the ditch near the town of Filadelfia and shot at them. Two workers were injured in the shooting and taken to Porvenir hospital.

¶ 15. (SBU) At approximately six a.m., more campesinos arrived at the other ditch at Tres Barracas, just five minutes from Porvenir. A group of Porvenir townspeople met the marchers and told them to turn back. Video exists of this interchange, where the townspeople warn that the ditch was dug to prevent violence that could occur if the campesinos entered Porvenir. The townspeople referenced their suspicions of the campesinos' motives after hearing of the two workers' bullet wounds. While these negotiations continued over two hours, a block of campesinos surrounded the then-unarmed townspeople, surprised them, and took nine hostages. The campesinos negotiated the release of the hostages in return for entry into Porvenir. During this time period, although it is not captured on video, it appears prefecture worker Pedro Oshiro was beaten and then killed by a shot to the head.

¶ 16. (C) According to the video, at about 10:00 a.m., campesinos were massed on the edge of Porvenir and armed with guns, dynamite, and teargas. In interviews, townspeople said the arms were provided by Becerra and by the Mayor of Filadelfia, a GOB ally. In a tense discussion with Poloff, Becerra denied the campesinos were armed. He added that he was no friend of Fernandez's but also not an ally of the GOB, that both sides were at fault, and that he is considering a run for the Pando Prefecture in April 2010.

¶ 17. (C) Video shows townspeople asking police present to disarm the marchers before they enter, but the police refused to disarm either the campesinos or the growing crowd of armed townspeople. The police, who report to the Ministry of Government (and not the Prefecture), reportedly requested instruction and were told not to intervene further. Senator Bravo said he rented private vehicles to get police to Porvenir.

¶ 18. (C) At about 10:30 a.m., as part of the deal to enter Porvenir, the campesinos released their hostages. Many had been beaten and gave interviews to local media detailing abuse and threats. The last hostage, Alfredo Cespedes, was killed. His appearance, along with the roughly simultaneous discovery of Pedro Oshiro's body, seems to have enraged the residents of Porvenir. From there, large-scale shooting broke out. During the fighting, nine campesinos were killed, some as they fled. In video of the firefight, two Filadelfia municipality trucks catch fire. Large amounts of ammunition inside the trucks explode, further putting into question the GOB's assertion that the campesinos were unarmed.

Comment

¶ 19. (C) From post's interviews and from viewing video of the clash, it seems clear the campesinos were not ambushed by pro-Fernandez forces, as the GOB and many in the international community assert. It is, however, difficult to confirm opposition claims that the exercise was planned by the GOB to oust Fernandez. It does appear the GOB took advantage of the violence to arrest Fernandez (who remains in

detention a year later without formal charges even as he campaigns). We expect the opposition will try to use the video to delay GOB efforts to accelerate criminal proceedings against Fernandez before the election. End comment.

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